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Since her permanent arrival in Australia in 1982, the Rev. Pravrajika Ajayaprana Mataji has become a well known and much admired figure in Australian Hindu circles. Although she is based in Sydney, where she heads the Ramakrishna Sarada Vedanta Society of New South Wales, she makes frequent trips to other parts of Australia. Her lecture tours are well attended by Hindus as well as those interested in Eastern philosophies. She has given a number of interviews to the Australian media. She has also lectured in the US, Malaysia, India and Singapore. In January 1989, she was a Hindu representative from Australia at the fifth World Conference on Religion and Peace convened in Melbourne. Mataji, as she is affectionately known in Australian Vedantic circles, was born in Kerala in 1926. She gained a Bachelor of Science degree prior to joining the Ramakrishna Order in 1952. In 1954 the nuns of the Ramakrishna Order were constituted as the Sri Sarada Math, the first entirely independent order of Hindu nuns in the world. In 1973 she was charged with the responsibility of establishing a branch of the Math in Trivandrum in Kerala.

Given her background in India and her deep involvement in Vedanta, HINDUISM TODAY wanted to talk about her coming to Australia, and to explore her views on Australian Hinduism. We caught up with her one wet and cold morning in the Adelaide hills, during her most recent visit to South Australia. The following are excerpts from our conversation.

HT: Could I ask you to provide some background to the establishment of the Sri Sarada Math?

Mataji: Swami Vivekananda wanted to start the order first for women, and only

then for men, but started work in Bengal, and Bengal was not ready for that. The women's order was not established until 1954, but before that many girls joined the order as equal members as the men, with the same training, but they were in separate institutions, separate buildings. When it was found that some of the girls were capable of running the whole show on their own, they began to pester the trustees for independent status

HT: What led to the Ramakrishna Order's establishment in Australia?

Mataji: In 1969, the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society was established by some Western people in Sydney. They invited Swami Ranganathananda, a world famous orator and scholar, to Australia every year. After several visits he said it would be better to have a permanent member residing here, to help the people along the Ramakrishna spiritual way. The Society members tried to get a swami to come and stay here, but the men's organization was already committed elsewhere. In 1977 they asked me to come and feel the pulse of the people. I stayed for six months, then came in 1978 and stayed for three months. In 1982 our headquarters, Sri Sarada Math, asked me to come for good, and the Ramakrishna Vedanta Center was registered as Ramakrishna Sarada Vedanta Society of New South Wales Inc. with me as president.

HT: How does the Ramakrishna Order relate to other Hindu Organizations in Australia?

Mataji: We are very friendly with all of them, but we don't go and attend their sessions in their places because surprisingly or naturally enough, Vedanta comprises within itself the whole gamut of spiritual teachings given by all other organizations.

HT: Australia is regarded as one of the most cynical and agnostic nations in the world. Do you find much interest or tolerance among Australians for the philosophical beliefs you hold?

Mataji: I don't agree with you if you say that Australia is agnostic. Australia is the

youngest civilization among the advanced countries, and does not have a firm culture of her own. But Australia does not have any ancient culture to pull her backward. She has been fed all through only by Christian doctrines, and because through all these years, the churches have not deviated from the stereotyped way of presenting religion, the thinking people of this present century find religion difficult to swallow. So I feel that it is the church people who say that Australians are agnostic. Those people who come to us are real seekers. Don't ask them to cling to tradition, and to believe what is given to them without analyzing. Now the Vedantic way of teaching is listening (education), thinking (reflection) and contemplation (absorption). Because this is a very scientific way, many Australian like vedantic teaching.

HT: One of the great problems of many Western societies seems to be absorption in materialism. Some believe this emptiness in Western society is about to change, and point to some elements in the environmental movement for example?

Mataji: Yes, people are trying to find various ways to fill the gap, but soon they will find that that will not be sufficient. Even the environmentalists are changing their colors, because that is not deep enough for their sustenance. The human mind is very powerful and it likes aiming for higher psychological, philosophical and spiritual things. Even the whimsical minds of the youngsters of Australia are very interested in deeper issues, so that itself is a sign that human mind can never be satisfied by any of the external values or activities.

HT: It seems that many Australian Hindus feel very defensive about their religion. A lot of Hindus feel that they're not welcome in Australia, and that they're not understood by the general population.

Mataji: That is true, because Hinduism is very complicated in its structure. We believe in one Godhead, which is viewed in different ways by different sages. Each formless, abstract, ultimate truth, each viewpoint is personified. Take the image of Kali dancing on Siva. Kali is creation, energy in motion, and Siva is lying prone, meaning that He is Brahman, potential energy. It becomes kinetic active energy that is Kali. It is so difficult to be understood, and many people literally believe that Kali is dancing on the form of Siva. It is not so. The energy is emerging from its source. So it is difficult for ordinary people to understand that. That is why Hindus find it difficult to acknowledge that to the general public, because they don't know how to explain these things.

HT: Hindu scholar Dr. P. Bilimoria has commented that Hindus in Australia need to re-evaluate their customs and rituals to discover the essential meaning of Hinduism.

Mataji: Many Hindus who were either blindly following or rejected Hindu customs in India, found many of them valuable - having real meaning - after coming to Vedanta or Sri Ramakrishna. Because we explain them from the philosophical standpoint. Every custom or ritual which has been laid down by the ancient sages for the average Hindu has in its range of vision the idea of promoting a hygienic life, bettering physical health, enlarging their mental vision and sharpening their intellectual capacity. But all that is lost in the mind of the average Hindu who comes here.

HT: Do you feel Hinduism should make a conscious effort to expand beyond the ethnic barriers in Australia; that is, it should not just be identified with ethnic Indians?

Mataji: Hinduism never tries to convert people. That is something which some groups have adopted from other religions. We - the Ramakrishna people - never try to attract or convert people. We simply make our presence known to people, and we were surprised to find that there were many people familiar with Sri Ramakrishna and his way of vedantic interpretation.

HT: What role should Hindu women play in Australia?

Mataji: The same role as men. I am the head of this organization.

Here, all within are guided by me. My position is equivalent to that of a bishop in Christianity. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda showed great respect to women. Sri Ramakrishna's first guru was a woman. He spent 32 years of his life in a temple constructed by a woman. His first disciple was a woman.

HT: Are Hindu women in Australia contributing?

Mataji: I don't think so. I wish they did. They are trying to imitate the life that is here. In India the rich people's wives, if they are sitting quietly at home, engage themselves in social activities. There, they will be members in many social committees, which they don't do here.

HT: For many years in the West there has been a big division between religion and science, particularly Christianity and science. Though there are signs now that that division is beginning to end. Yet this has never really been a major issue in Eastern societies.

Mataji: Science builds on the external world, the material world, but science is really looking for the truth behind this world. And pure religion also does that, and Vedanta is not confined within the dogmas of any institution like the Church. Perhaps Hinduism is the only religion which hasn't clashed with science regarding creation and other universal ideas. What modern science now says about creation Vedanta said more than 8,000 years ago. For example, Hindus knew about the existence and the characteristics of the pineal gland long, long ago. Western scientists are only discovering the various facets of that gland now. In his book Holographic Paradigm Karl Pribram says that with science perhaps 4,000 years ago is tomorrow. That is, what was found out 4,000 years ago our scientists are going to find out tomorrow. I like that phrase!

HT: Do you think that Western science has anything to offer Hindus?

Mataji: Whatever Western science offers, Hindus will accept. Because Hindus have known about it long ago. Have you heard about the conversation between Rabindranath Tagore and physicist Werner Heisenberg? Heisenberg was reluctant to place before the public his "uncertainty principle." Then he met Tagore, and he had happened to mention his difficulty in presenting this seemingly terrifying strange principle. Tagore said, "In Vedanta we have had still stranger principles, and we never were afraid to present it before the public," and Heisenberg got encouragement from that.

HT: How many adherents of Vedanta are there in Australia?

Mataji: We have about 250 members in Sydney, and about the same in the other cities. Altogether, we have about 500. In Sydney, about 75% are Westerners. In other parts most are Indians. There are independent societies in each state. I am the president of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of New South Wales, and also the group in South Australia. But only in Sydney have we got a monastic center. There are three nuns who have come from India, and one Australian novice, and two young Australian men living as monks in another house.

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